

Guiding the Hand of the Vestige

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Guiding the Hand of the Vestige

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Summary

The Vestige has a weakness that may endanger the Companions' mission. Abnur Tharn, believe it or not, attempts to help.

Sequel to [The Dark Places of the Mind](#).

Contains main quest spoilers.

The main character's negative self-talk is not a reflection of the author's beliefs.

Update: The second chapter includes characters discussing, among other things, non-con fantasies. All sexual activity that actually takes place is consensual, but readers who don't want to see even hypothetical lack of consent should be aware.

"If we succeed, history shall record that it was the knowledge and ambition of Abnur Tharn that brought about the salvation of this world by guiding the hand of the Vestige. If we fail, then none will be the wiser, for we shall all become the lifeless, mindless servants of the Daedric Prince until the end of time."

Chapter 1

There had been a time in Arianne's life when all mornings were more or less the same.

Back home in Daggerfall, beyond the sea and the gulf that separated the *before* and the *after*, they had meant getting up all quick and lively and starting to make herself useful. She had made a habit of keeping herself busy from sunrise to late afternoon: fixing breakfast for her elderly parents, studying literature, horse-riding and the lute, honing her archery skills, going to the market for bread or vegetables...

That life had ended under the necromancer's knife, but old habits died harder. The lack of comforting, familiar structure to her days made her uneasy, left too much time for dwelling on things she'd rather not. Such as the dreams she had when she did manage to sleep, and the images in her head when she did not and instead tossed and turned for hours.

After the encounter with Abnur Tharn's illusion magic, the latter had changed somewhat. The flickers of Coldharbour imagery were still there, blended in most disturbingly with more earthly memories and fantasies; she would still succumb to them eventually, slip a hand inside her smallclothes and give herself a quick, hard release. There was no shame in the act, but plenty in the visions and voices that filled her mind as she did it: slick azure plasm on bare skin, uncaring hands spreading her limbs roughly, inhuman laughter from red mouths in ashen faces –

But now, there were also the things Tharn had said. *I can help you with that as well. A bit of pain with your pleasure... submission to your betters... you'll sleep easier.*

If his plan had been to put an idea in her mind and let it germinate, she had to acknowledge – even as she smothered her moans into the blanket folded into a makeshift pillow, fingers still buried between her legs, shaking from the aftershocks – that it was working.

In any case, it wasn't as though it mattered whether or not she got up at sunrise, here in the Harborage. There was not much to do for her, except wait for word of further developments from the Prophet. Lyris, who had unofficially taken on provider duties for the little group, refused any attempts to lighten her workload. "I'll go stir-crazy if I don't get to exercise under the open sky," she would say, and would usually return hours later with a brace of birds, some fish, or a basket of fruit. Some days she got rabbits from the traps she'd set, and they would have stew, prepared by Lyris and cooked on a fire for which she had chopped the wood. Nothing could persuade her that others could have done some of those tasks as well.

The Prophet, meanwhile, had taken to withdrawing into one of the smaller caverns deeper underground, leaving instructions to not break his meditation for any reason while he was there. Arianne wasn't sure if he was even present in his physical body during those times; the thought made her vaguely uncomfortable. In any case, as long as his attention was somewhere in the Aetherius, he obviously did not require care or company.

As for Tharn, he seemed to prefer keeping to himself as well, mostly occupied with reading, writing, enchantments, or what appeared to be some kind of small-scale magical operations. He seemed entirely immune to the need for friendly chatter. Yet, ever since he'd moved in, he'd been a... presence. He always seemed to be there when Arianne looked from the corner of her eye. In fact, sometimes when she did so, he was looking back at her, and his piercing blue gaze was saying that he *knew*.

Since their private little conversation, she'd felt a jab of unease whenever that happened. Tharn was

aware that she was a liability; that she could be manipulated, broken in the places where she was already cracked, and that she might endanger the entire mission. Indeed, she couldn't fathom why he hadn't told the others yet.

Still, he had also had a point. Out of the two evils, he was the lesser, though he would undoubtedly have resented the word.

True, he was unnaturally ancient – exactly how old did he have to be for having served three emperors, even relatively short-lived ones? True, she trusted him about as much as she trusted a Khajiit to swear off sugar. But at least he was, in the end, a mere Imperial man, vastly preferable to an unspeakable horror from Oblivion. If him being around could make her less susceptible to the latter... didn't it only make sense to accept what was offered?

This, she assured herself, was only regarding his offer to shield her in Coldharbour. Not that other offer of his. She wouldn't even think of it a moment longer. Not the kind of things he could do to her if he wanted to. The fact that he very likely did want to do them.

Yes, she would stop thinking about that right now. Or at least soon.

*

On that particular morning, as Arianne emerged from the nook where she had her bedroll, blanket and few belongings, she found herself alone in the cavern. Predictably, Lyris was nowhere to be seen, but had left a hastily scrawled note about going hunting. The Prophet and Tharn were likewise absent. This being the case, Arianne figured that the best use of her time would be to practise her archery. She set up a makeshift target in the main cavern: a crate lid set on a rough sidetable, leaning against the wall, with a circle drawn on it with a piece of coal to mark the centre. Not ideal, but it would do.

She'd been rehearsing shooting three arrows accurately in rapid succession for some time when she noticed Tharn had entered. More specifically, he had seated himself comfortably in a chair some distance away. There were books piled on the table behind him, but he had left them alone and was now very clearly watching her. His grey hair looked darker when wet – she wondered if he had magically ported somewhere with a bathtub and servants to fill it. She did not believe for a moment that he would wash with cold water from a bucket if it could be avoided.

"Do continue," Tharn said with no regard whatsoever to her frowning. She gritted her teeth and turned sharply, pulling another arrow from the quiver.

The practice didn't feel the same with him sitting there. While she couldn't see him, she was conscious of him, and her mind kept whirling around the topic of why he was there. Was he evaluating her capability to undertake the rescue mission? Was he simply being an old lecher? Or was this... was it about what he'd said the other day? The things that had happened?

She glanced back and saw that he had conjured a fireball. He was juggling it with relaxed ease, most of his attention still on her. A mage playing with a fireball behind her back! By the Eight, how was she supposed to concentrate with that going on?

"Must you keep distracting me?" she snapped. She didn't like the way the words sounded as they came out. She'd been trying for haughty, not huffy and accusing.

"Really? By sitting here? If this is enough to distract you, we have no hope." Tharn waved his hand at the floating fireball, which folded in on itself without a sound and vanished. "Do you think the Daedra will graciously look the other way while you carry on like a man too shy to piss in the back

alley? If anything, I should be honing your skills by distracting you more."

He rose and strode up to her, turned her around by the shoulders to face the target again.

"*That* is where your focus needs to be. Even if there's fire and death all around you. Even if someone is messing with your mind, no matter how wet they make you."

She hated how that made her cheeks burn. She clenched her teeth, nocked a new arrow, lifted the bow.

"That's right, Vestige. Draw and aim. Were you always so very reactive, I wonder? Or did Coldharbour drag something up from the depths of your mind to make you this way? See, that wasn't a completely terrible shot – you did hit the target, at least. Again, quickly! That posture brings out your chest nicely, you know. Oh dear, that wasn't even close! It's as if your hands were shaking. Surely that can't be? Try again."

He talked Arianne through half a quiver of arrows, delivering constant commentary sprinkled with whatever remarks might throw her off balance. To her consternation, many of them did exactly that. It was because he was standing so close behind her, she reasoned, she wouldn't have minded otherwise. She had her back turned to a powerful battlemage. Anyone would be nervous.

And yet it was not nervousness that frayed her concentration like an unfinished hem. It was the fact that she knew what Tharn knew – which was way too much – and that he seemed to take great pleasure in the knowledge. He'd pulled the carefully concealed darkness inside her out into the light, just like that, looked at it and grinned in its face.

*

She hadn't counted on that happening, not ever. Even before... even when she'd still had her soul, but certainly after. People would only see her soft, innocent features, her golden hair with the slightest hint of red that sunlight brought out, and assume she was all kinds of things she was not. No one wanted to look past the outer shell.

Now, with her soul gone and with it all hope, she'd envisioned a life of keeping her distance, of withdrawing from talk and touch when it turned weighty with amorous intentions. To do otherwise would have meant living a lie, playing the role of a sweet, sunny darling daughter of Daggerfall, carefree and fulfilled by flowers and chivalry. No, she had decided no one that mattered would ever know. No one would see her darkness.

Except then Tharn had, and so easily.

*

"Your concentration is failing. Predictably."

"You're not helping," she bit back.

"I'm not supposed to, remember? Or is your memory failing as well?"

He laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Look, Vestige, I know what's going on with you. I also know you must learn to either act despite your thoughts and feelings, or find a relatively safe channel for them so you're not at their mercy. Right now, you wouldn't walk into the Halls of Torment as a saviour but the next ripe and ready victim."

She looked away, pretending to inspect a stain on her sleeve. Why did he have to affect her like that, why couldn't she just shake all of this off? Did he really have to use words like *ripe* and *ready*?

"You need to give in so badly."

That sounded different; almost gentle, or as close to it as she supposed a Tharn, any Tharn, could get. She felt cool air at the back of her neck as he lifted her hair and brushed it over one shoulder. The small touch made her shiver, and she heard him chuckle.

"Admit it. Your body already has."

"Why – Why are you doing all this?" Her heart was pounding so hard all of a sudden, it seemed impossible that the beat wasn't echoing off the walls of the cavern.

"Apart from the reasons I have already painstakingly explained? You really don't know, do you?"

She shook her head. Tharn sighed.

"Why does a thief want to open a lockbox? Why does a healer persist even when the patient is being difficult? Vestige..." He cleared his throat. "Arianne. To someone with... compatible tastes, you're both the lockbox that refuses to give up the gems inside and the wounded that suffers for no reason while the healer is right there. You are, to put it simply, both incredibly frustrating and irresistible."

It was such a shock to hear him say those words that she needed a moment to go over them, repeat them in her head, weigh each nuance and possibility. That moment lasted long enough for Tharn to reach around her, and when she didn't move away, begin to pull the laces of her shirt undone. He ran a caressing fingertip along her shoulderblade and down her cleavage as he did so, and by the time he was done unlacing, her breath came in little gasps and it was pointless to pretend any more. Whatever this thing between them was, for better or worse, it was going to be played out.

"Reactive, like I said."

She glanced down and flushed hot all over, because her nipples were so obviously hard under the thin off-white cloth. Tharn plucked at them, ran a fingernail over them, making her back arch and her lips let slip a small, strained whimper. She was a puppet on strings, and he, she had no doubt, was an expert puppeteer.

She was neither a virgin nor completely oblivious, and could tell he wasn't unaffected by the goings-on. But when she tried to turn around and reciprocate in some way, he stopped her.

"Not now. We've got something else that needs to be taken care of. Tell me, Arianne, what is it that you want?"

How could he sound so infuriatingly calm? How could he, when she was so out of control?

"Damn it to Oblivion! You know!"

"Such provincial manners." He sighed theatrically. "I see we have to return to the very basics. Who are you speaking to?"

"What? You. Who else?"

"Use my full title."

She blinked, slow to respond, too slow for his liking. Those merciless fingers pinched her right nipple, hard, and a jolt of heat shot through her whole body.

"Abnur Tharn, Grand Chancellor of the Elder Council, Overlord of N-Nibenay," she recounted. It came out shakier than she had wanted it to. The desire had built up to a hot clench inside her, ghostly claws raking her spine.

"Much better. And what was it again that you wanted? I will remind you this once," the hand moved away from her chest as he spoke, "that 'you know' is not an acceptable answer. I do know, of course. You couldn't make it more obvious if you tried. However, I've decided I prefer to hear you say it."

"I... please," she managed dazedly, her attention drawn to the journey of Tharn's hand down her side and hip. She did not see but could practically sense the raised eyebrows and tried again, "I mean... I want you to... touch me."

"And?"

The shape of his palm on her thigh, she felt it like burning, needed it to move closer, needed –

She moaned as Tharn cupped her sex through her trousers, pressing just so, and Divines, she knew the cloth was damp all the way through. But the pressure felt so good, it pushed aside the part of her that still felt embarrassment, and she let the need take over and make her hips move into the touch.

"Please let me come," she muttered, grinding shamelessly against his palm, "please, I need to, I want..."

"Not yet."

"What?!" She tossed her head, wild with frustration.

"I want you to hit the target first. One more good shot."

"Not fair," she hissed between clenched teeth.

"Unlike the Daedra," he mocked, "who are always fair and will sit back and wait until our hero is feeling less horny? Pick up the bow and do as I'm telling you."

The first shot was an utter embarrassment. Arianne spat out a few words a girl from a good family was not even supposed to know, then drew and aimed again. This time, the arrow hit the edge of the crate lid, loosening a splinter. She glanced over her shoulder, only to be met with crossed arms, a stern glare and a shake of the head.

Calmly, she told herself. Breathe in. Breathe out. Become the arrow. Seek the target. Release –

"I've seen worse," Tharn's voice was very near her ear all of a sudden, "that will do." She saw the third arrow had landed a hand's width off the centre of the target, was about to say something in her defence, but he pulled her tight against him and his mouth was on the soft bit of her earlobe, his *teeth* were, and a red haze fell over everything.

She was only half conscious of having dropped her precious bow, something she wasn't proud of later. It was just too much to think of anything else while her sash and the drawstring of her trousers were being unknotted, while her smallclothes were tugged out of the way, and then he was touching her *right there* and she came easily and inevitably like a crashing wave.

*

"Very good." His voice reverberated through her while she was still on her way down from that high, panting and weak at the knees. "Now that we've taken the edge off, let's do this properly. Those trousers must go, first of all. And while you're at it, the shirt, and the rest as well. Oh, come on, it's a bit late for shyness, don't you think?"

He was clearly not going to undress, and though he wasn't wearing his heavy pauldrons, the contrast between the clothed Overlord of Nibenay and the now-unclothed Arianne the Vestige couldn't have been more stark. She fought against the urge to cover herself and mostly succeeded. Squeezing her thighs together was no use, however. It merely heightened her awareness of the throbbing and the wetness between them.

"You really are going to waste cooped up in here. You should be paraded around, shown off to lords and ladies. Such a nice plaything you'd make for them."

He moved closer again, brushed her arm aside when she instinctively tried to hide behind it, and lifted her breasts, studying them. She felt her face turn an even deeper red.

"Shocked? You'd be surprised by what goes on behind closed doors in certain very fine mansions."

"We're not," she breathed, "in a fine mansion now."

"Certainly not," he admitted. "If we were, I would have you bent over a fancy armchair or somesuch. But we're in this primitive hole in the rock instead, so..."

He kissed her then, which she hadn't expected at all. He hadn't seemed the type. She felt his hand in her hair, grabbing firmly and tilting her head back, and that together with his tongue sliding against hers turned her insides into liquid all over again.

"Your bedroll. Where is it?"

She motioned towards her sleeping nook.

"That will have to do."

Chapter 2

"One thing's for sure: you really do need a proper bed."

On this, Arianne had to agree with Tharn: her bedroll was not made with two people or comfort in mind. Most of it was now occupied by her in any case, what with Tharn having most of his clothes protecting him from the roughness of the cavern floor. She could at least be grateful for that measure of chivalry.

His chivalry, however, wasn't stopping him from using his free hand for touching her naked body in very indecent ways. He kept stroking her flanks, slapping her breasts lightly, drawing circles around her navel with the side of his thumb. It wasn't enough to make her beg for it, but just enough to keep her wanting more.

"Since aiming while distracted still seems to be challenging for you, we'll try something more simple: stringing together coherent sentences." He drew long, sweeping lines up her sides, lacing the touches with the tiniest bit of tingling magicka. "Tell me about your first time."

"Is it relevant?" Her words tapered into a half-moan when he chanced on a spot near her armpit that was terribly sensitive.

"I decide what's relevant. Talk to me."

*

Though she hadn't spared it much thought for a long time, the memory was easy to retrieve and relive. She had been just on the better side of eighteen, Glashna a year older. But Glashna had been training with sword and shield, she wanted to be a full-fledged warrior one day, and she, being an Orc, was so much bigger and stronger in any case. It had always been Glashna, a natural leader, who initiated all the adventures and mischief they got up to. That time, too, in the half-collapsed old watchtower where they had sought shelter from the rain. Glashna had taken the lead and told her what to do, and she had done it.

"She didn't force you?" The hand stroking her paused.

"No, no, it was fine, I... I wanted it. I wanted it so much."

That was the best and the worst part: how she had immediately fallen under Glashna's spell, needing only the other girl's tight grasp of her head and a hoarsely whispered order. She'd never really thought of her friend that way before, but suddenly it had been the most natural thing in the world, the only thing that mattered, to please Glashna, to do things with her lips and tongue and fingers that she hadn't even known people could do.

She hadn't received anything in return, not then; it hadn't occurred to either of them that she should have, with Glashna being dazed by her own pleasure and Arianne from the shock of having succeeded in providing it. But she did touch herself afterwards, countless times, while picturing the scene again in her mind.

"Hmm. And then? Was it always women?"

Arianne shook her head. No, it hadn't always been women, or Orcs, or any other specific type, unless it was that they had power over her in some way or were willing to take charge. There had been a stablehand with something of a fixation on riding crops. A respected, older couple with a

secret room for trysts in the cellar; they insisted on Arianne serving both of them at the same time. A huge Nord who claimed to be a werewolf, even, though she'd never seen any hint of such... unless it counted that he wanted her on all fours, and that he bit.

She had sworn it all off after the werewolf man, but her chastity had lasted just over a month. Then she had been back to seeking chances to satisfy her cravings. Too many risks, foolish in retrospect, but she'd always been lucky; her worst experiences had simply been unsatisfying instead of deadly.

Until the time she followed a mysterious hooded figure who promised to show her such a good time that all of Tamriel had never seen the like, and her luck had run out once and for all.

*

Tharn had been listening intently as she spoke, nodding every once in a while.

"It figures." He shifted against her, and the chafe of his breeches against her bare skin brought goosebumps. "Who else knew?"

"Nobody. Not until now. My family just thought there was... some boy."

They were both silent for a long while. Then, just as she was beginning to worry that she'd said something off-putting, he leaned over her, took her chin in his hand and turned her head so that her eyes couldn't help but meet his.

"Vestige." It sounded more meaningful now, less like a way to put distance between them and more like an acknowledgment of something. "You need not think I'm judging you. My own most recent exploits include having resided in the Castle of the Worm, standing by Mannimarco's side and, like a merry little hireling, pretending to go along with his plans. I probably helped a few of his schemes come to fruition as I did so. I am Abnur Tharn – there is nothing you could possibly say that could shock me."

"But you haven't heard the worst of it. In Coldharbour..."

She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together, afraid to let any more incriminating thoughts be voiced.

"Go on."

In for a drake, in for the whole purse.

"In Coldharbour, the guards didn't... use my body. They hardly even touched me. They threatened to, many times, but there was a superior of some kind, one they feared, who said they weren't allowed. Hadn't earned the right to... play... with the Shriven. I was terrified, but afterwards... I wished they had. It turned me on, alright? I know it's wrong. I know."

His shoulder was a good place to bury her face right then. That way she wouldn't have to see his expression, the loathing he might very possibly have for her now, despite all he'd said to the contrary.

Curious. She hadn't noticed before that his clothes smelled faintly of herbal soap.

"Yes. I understand."

"You do?" The words were mostly muffled into his jerkin.

"Because you used to dream about that kind of thing, didn't you, just not with the actual horrors. And now it's tearing you apart, because you've seen the real thing, and you've started to think you deserve the horrors if you've ever dreamed of the pleasures. Correct me, this once, if I'm wrong."

She said nothing.

"Look, Arianne. Only fools believe in fate, but *something* has clearly conspired to make you quite an important player in the grand scheme of things. And that means I need to get one thing through to you once and for all."

He spoke quietly, his mouth so close to her scalp that she felt the warmth of his breath:

"The pleasures can be had without the horrors."

"What do you mean?" Her lips felt dry, and the pit of her stomach fluttered restlessly.

"What I said. The things you crave can be had without the destructive elements. However, if any part of you believes your particular desires make you worthless, good for nothing but floundering towards inevitable and deserved doom... well, we can't afford that part. The sooner you get rid of it, the more hope there is for all of Tamriel."

He shifted again, was definitely at least half hard now, and her body seemed to respond of its own accord. She wrapped her leg around his, and the slight, nearly imperceptible hitching of his breath set the butterflies in her stomach on fire.

"Do you understand? Use your imagination for whatever you like. I guarantee you there'll be no shortage of people eager to explore those things with you, if that's what you wish, and in a manner where everyone leaves happy, satisfied, and with their life and limb intact."

The leg-wrapping had left parts of her unguarded, and of course he would take advantage of that. His fingers dipped unexpectedly into the wet heat of her, and she cried out, still swollen and sensitive from before.

"Just do not, for even a moment, think that it means you deserve to be destroyed by Molag Bal *for real*."

Her eyes snapped open, and yes, she should have been horrified that he'd spoken that name, but her senses were too full of other things – being half-pinned under the battlemage, for one, and how he was fully aroused now, and how she wanted that hard length right where his fingers were. And also, strangely, it was as if the name had lost some of its power, become less real compared to Tharn's physical presence.

"Do it already," she muttered, "please. You want to. I want you to."

He stilled for the briefest moment, and her heart raced: had that been too forward? Would he make her pay for what almost counted as ordering him about? Would it be so bad if he did? As long as he eventually...

"Yes."

Oh. That was easy.

Though he *had* been waiting for a long time for his own pleasure. She hadn't really realised before how much he had been holding back, the amount of self-control required. Even now, the only evident haste was in the way he was unlacing his breeches. She wished he would do it even faster –

and oh, there, *that* was what she wanted.

He positioned himself, Divines, why so carefully, her hips twitched in a pathetic attempt to offer herself up, and then finally –

She had missed it so much. The bliss of the weight of another body on top of her, the simple, primal movement, the sounds of heavy breathing and flesh against flesh. If she could just stay in this moment forever, thoughtless and without care...

Tharn would give her no such luxury. He slowed down, then stopped moving entirely, sheathed fully inside her and refusing to be goaded by her desperate little noises.

"Look at me," he said. She did so. The determined glint in his narrowed eyes told her this would happen at his pace, in the way of his choosing.

"There is a place called the Grotto of Depravity in Coldharbour," he mused while stroking the vulnerable insides of her thighs and staining them with her own wetness. "It's where the Dremora play with the captives who have the misfortune to be in their favour."

She wanted to ask why he was telling her this, but the words wouldn't come out right. He wasn't even moving, and yet somehow she was getting close again, and it was both better and worse with him inside her, him being able to feel her reactions. No secrets, everything revealed.

"I happened to visit on a day when the theme of the celebration was conjuration. Very interesting uses of that school indeed. A favourite that day seemed to be a particular conjured plaything, a replica of sorts, I would assume, that they called 'The Master's Mace'. Though it wasn't a weapon in the conventional sense."

His utterly calm description of this horror should have made her cover her ears, but he was now rubbing circles around that slick bud where the pleasure was so keen and sweet that it almost hurt. The edge was near, she would fall any moment now.

"If you ask nicely, I may conjure one for you some day," he said, and she whimpered and shook her head even as her entire body tensed helplessly, manipulated by his words and touch. "I can't always be around to satisfy you, after all. Though I'd like to see you – working to fit it inside – ah – yes, come for me again, yes –"

*

The first one who spoke afterwards was, predictably, Tharn.

"Congratulations, Vestige. You have seen me at a vulnerable moment. That makes you unique in this company of Companions."

"Company of Companions?" She laughed somewhat breathlessly. "I expected you to come up with something more clever than that."

"Careful," he countered, "if you want to make use of the portal I will open in a moment, to somewhere with certain conveniences. Including hot water and crisp towels."

"I knew it! You've been going somewhere else to bathe!"

Tharn raised his eyebrows, and she wished the ground would open up and swallow her whole and entire, because for all that she'd revealed, there were some things one just didn't say.

"You have been thinking about my bathing arrangements? I could see you were desperate, but –"

He was interrupted by the sound of the heavy door down the corridor being unlatched, followed by loud, not very melodious whistling. Lyris, returning from her hunting trip early.

"I believe this is a good time to make our exit," he said and began conjuring the portal.

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